

# SARTORIAL SPLENDOR

*Story : William Brodeur*



BANGKOK'S CUSTOM TAILOR SHOPS LET YOU DRESS TO IMPRESS.



I remember when I first arrived in Bangkok and was eager for an insider's tip, so I asked a sharply-dressed hedge fund manager I knew where he bought his immaculate Italian wool suits and oxford shirts. He pointed me to Raja's Fashions, a second-generation tailor on Sukhumvit Soi 4 renowned for dressing US Embassy personnel, military men and even a US senator or two. He told me to ask for "Bobby" when I got there.

Bobby Gulati, the turbaned proprietor, welcomed me with a cold beer, a short inquisition ("Ah, Douglas, how's his investment business?") and then proceeded to run his tape measure along my trunk and upper body, sizing me up for some shirts and calling out my measurements in Thai to one of his assistants. More than a year later, having not seen him again since, I returned to order a tuxedo, and Bobby greeted me by name as I walked through the door: "William. How've you been?" Bobby is known along Sukhumvit Road for his uncanny memory.

The cosy interior at Raja's is crammed with massive fabric rolls – fine cottons on one side, wools and cashmeres on the other – and customers are given a small piece of chalk to mark their selections (note: This month, Raja's Fashions will move to a new location on Sukhumvit Road near Soi 8). In Bangkok, the price difference between off-the-rack and made-to-measure shirts has always hovered tantalisingly close to nothing. You can buy a decent brand-name dress shirt at a high-end department store for about 1,500 baht; the same price at a local tailor gets you a similar fabric custom-fit to your body. The longer you stay here, the easier the math becomes.

Raja's Fashions, like many of the city's reputable tailors, enjoys its loyal followers, including a big chunk of the American expat community. Other friends and acquaintances swear allegiance to other shops, and among long-time Bangkok residents, surely there are few people who still have no idea where to start. For the truly uninitiated, finding the right tailor must feel daunting, given all the choices. Wherever business and tourism thrive in the city – on Silom, lower Sukhumvit, even nowadays on Khao San Road – tailor shops seem to proliferate like so many noodle carts.

Some advice: older shops generally have survived in this crowded and competitive market for a reason. They take care of their customers, they aren't pushy, and they offer, in most cases, high-quality fabrics, skilled workmanship and a genuine commitment to service. It should go without saying that a parking lot full of tuk-tuks is a warning sign.

This city is full of world-class sartorial options, if you know where to look. Quality varies, of course, but some of it would be considered "as good as it gets" anywhere in the world. Take Duly, for instance, tucked

down Sukhumvit Soi 49 in a stylishly appointed corner boutique. The shop has built a reputation as a fine shirt specialist. When the store's owners Vichuda Phanurai and Doonyanart Bejrajati opened their doors eight years ago, comparable top European-standard shirts simply couldn't be found in Bangkok for a reasonable price. High-end international brands were sold in some department stores, but the "price was crazy, like 8,000 to 9,000 baht per shirt," Vichuda says.

Seeking to fill this gap, the duo began to carve their niche as shirt makers, sourcing the best fabrics from top Italian mills and forging smart new designs that remained classic while incorporating modern trends. Duly's imported fabrics continue to be made from the highest quality Egyptian, Sea Island and Giza cottons.

Initially, they only sold ready-made shirts, designed by Doonyanart, and presented off the rack. But as demand grew for made-to-measure services, the shop began to offer custom-tailored shirts too. Today this segment – at a price premium of just 500 to 1,000 baht per shirt – comprises nearly 40 percent of their overall business. Each quarter, Doonyanart designs 16 new shirt styles to showcase the latest trends, and these model shirts can be bought ready-made or ordered custom-fit. Of course, customers can also use these model shirts as guidelines, keeping a few elements but otherwise creating entirely new looks.

For custom-made shirts, the choices at Duly, as elsewhere, are nearly endless. Besides gussets, plackets, buttons, monograms and thread colours, customers also can choose from 22 different collar styles, eight different cuffs and three pocket designs (or no pocket at all). The shop's seasoned sales staff has been trained to make suggestions. "We like our customers to spend time here and enjoy themselves," Vichuda says.

The most exclusive fabrics available at Duly hail from David and John Anderson's collection at Albini and feature luxurious thread counts up to 300 per square inch. These fabrics must be individually ordered and cut piece-by-piece, with prices for a finished shirt running around 12,000 baht.

Besides its Sukhumvit location, Duly also recently opened a new second branch at the five-star Siam Kempinski Hotel. It replaces a previous Duly branch at Siam Paragon, which is now closed.

Across town, near the banks of the Chao Phraya River, World Group Company Ltd enjoys similar prestige as "a tailor of choice" recommended by the concierge staff at the legendary Mandarin Oriental Bangkok.

Inside the vast two-storey boutique next to the hotel, amidst row-upon-row of fine imported fabrics, framed photographs advertise some of the shop's most distinguished customers. The King of Sweden has



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shopped here. The King of Tonga has been buying clothes here since he was crown prince, says Nuttha Lerthasanawong, the store's sales manager. Even His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej has worn suits and shirts from World Group, the sales manager says, including a pink blazer and a special purple jacket embroidered with the King's beloved dog Thongdaeng.

Set inside an opulent house, and retaining the regal feel of its five-star neighbour, World Group uses only the finest fabrics, such as Zegna, Loro Piana and Dormueil. The second floor, which is devoted to ladies' clothing, showcases a selection of luscious silks and chiffons, as well as ready-made jewellery, purses and more.

Open for more than 50 years, this second-generation custom clothing shop operates two locations in the same neighbourhood: one just steps from the hotel's front entrance, and another up the street on Charoenkrung Road, next to Assumption College.

"We do everything in house," Nuttha says of World Group's tailoring process. "Everyone is an expert on a particular position of clothing. Our master cutters have expertise piece-by-piece." By this, she explains that each section of a garment is crafted by its own specialist.

Separate tailors, for instance, sew each part of a suit jacket: one for the body, another for the collar and lapel, and yet another for the arms.

Asked what makes an exceptional tailor, Nuttha replies, "When you make a suit, it has to correct your body. Some people might have a big tummy, or maybe their shoulders are not equal or their arms aren't the same length. The master tailor has to correct these to make your suit look perfect."

Back among the bustle of Sukhumvit Road, Narin Couture is the sort of place you easily might walk right past, what with the young salesmen perched outside other nearby tailor shops extending an eager hand, smiling – "Hello, my friend" – and pointing at signboards that advertise "2 suits + 2 shirts + 2 silk ties = \$189 US."

Dressed in a classic wool vest and necktie, and sporting sleek Oakley designer glasses, Narin Bowonnaowarux, the soft-spoken proprietor at Narin Couture, doesn't compete using the aggressive sales tactics of some of his neighbors. Asked how he attracts new customers, he tells me, with a smile, "I don't reach them. They reach me. If you do things the proper way, people come to see you."

"Our customers know what they're looking for," he



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LESS THAN TOP GLOBAL STANDARDS HERE"**



#### WHERE TO SHOP

*Raja's Fashions*  
160/1 Sukhumvit Road  
0 2253 8379, [www.rajafashions.com](http://www.rajafashions.com)

*Duty*  
Sukhumvit Soi 49 (at intersection with Soi 49/3)  
Also at Siam Kempinski Boutique 2nd floor  
0 2662 6647-8 or 0 2251 8818-9  
[www.laladuty.co.th](http://www.laladuty.co.th)

*World Group Company Ltd*  
1302-4 Charoenkrung Road  
0 2234 1527, [www.worldgroupbkk.com](http://www.worldgroupbkk.com)

*Narin Couture*  
180 Sukhumvit Road (between Soi 8 and Soi 10)  
0 2251 9237, [www.narin-couture.com](http://www.narin-couture.com)

*Siam Emporium*  
170-171 Sukhumvit Road (corner of Sukhumvit Soi 8)  
0 2253 3421-2, [www.siamemporium.net](http://www.siamemporium.net)

continues. "They know who we are, and they know they will never get anything less than top global standards here."

Educated at the renowned French fashion school Ecole de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne, Narin returned to Bangkok in 1997 to join his family business. His shop sources top-quality fabrics, such as Holland & Sherry, Thomas Mason and Ermenegildo Zegna, and his in-house tailoring workshop follows rigid European standards for production and finishing.

"Tailoring is like building a house," Narin says. "It should reflect your personality, fit exactly how you like and make you feel totally comfortable."

In a neighbourhood where "street cred" often means displaying photographs of Hollywood stars in your shop windows, Narin isn't showy. He doesn't advertise his big-name customers, even though over the years he has worked with numerous Hollywood costume designers on location in Bangkok. One of his most recent projects was *Hangover 2*. He also worked on *Shanghai*, starring John Cusack. And Narin counts *Kickboxer* star Jean-Claude Van Damme as a repeat customer.

"With big budget films, they prepare many of their costumes from home, but they need local help as well," Narin says. "During shooting, things change all the time, so they need a local expert who can help them."

A few doors down, on the corner of Sukhumvit Soi 8, Siam Emporium is run by a family of veteran tailors whose business dates back to the early 1970s, when they opened their first branch in Siam Center. According to the owner Jit Malhotra, 75 percent of Siam Emporium's business comes from repeat customers or recommendations, which isn't atypical for long-standing tailor businesses.

"We know if we sell a person good quality, and he's satisfied, that directly or indirectly, he will come back many more times," he says. "We feel that all of our customers have the potential to be repeat business."

A shining example of this philosophy is the business-inside-a-business that Siam Emporium has developed with some of its overseas customers. Last year, Jit estimates he sold more than 400 suits and 4,000 shirts under brands created by his overseas customer-partners, who sent measurements and placed orders from Europe using a customised style book. "France, Holland, Sweden, Finland, Germany," Jit says, pausing at the last one. "This guy here sold 3 million baht last year."

Still, Siam Emporium stresses the fundamentals of its workmanship and service.

"We have a mutual understanding and trust," Jit says. "You have to be very fair in your business, in terms of quality, price and service. We appreciate better quality, and people who know the difference can see that very clearly in our work." 📍